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Iraq War Veteran Treated by Virtual Reality Therapy

Haunted by Iraq, Soldier Uses Unique Therapy to Cope with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



Images such as this are part of the virtual reality treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder being used to treat soldiers at Emory University. (ABC News)

By **DAN HARRIS and DEBORAH APTON**
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From Nightline

Sgt. Bryan Neal spent a harrowing and bloody year in Iraq with the Georgia National Guard. He survived dozens of IED attacks. On many occasions, he saw his friends suffer and die.

When he came home, he treated his post-traumatic stress disorder in a way some might find supremely counterintuitive -- by repeatedly reliving his worst memories in virtual reality.

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For weeks, Neal went into a small room at Emory University in Atlanta, put on a virtual reality helmet and was digitally transported back to the dusty, dangerous streets of Iraq.

When we asked Neal about his initial reaction to this experimental approach, he said, "I thought there's no way I want to do this."

But he said he felt he had no choice. His time in Iraq was haunting him.

"It was a constant state of stress and worry," Neal said of his tour of duty. "If you don't do something right, somebody will get seriously hurt or die."

Nightmares and Flashbacks

In his first few months at home, Neal seemed to be adjusting well. He married his college sweetheart and went back to work as a salesman in suburban Atlanta. But soon he started having nightmares and flashbacks. When driving, Neal couldn't stop thinking about roadside bombs.

"I see a bag on the side of the road, and I swerve. And I've almost gotten into accidents where I've swerved into oncoming traffic and almost run somebody off the road."

At work and at home, he couldn't get back into the old routine. "I felt like I couldn't concentrate at work, and I felt like I was really short with people around me and was really bringing that experience here, home. And I knew that I needed to get help from someone."

Re-creating Soldiers' Memories

Neal sought help at Emory University, where he was diagnosed with PTSD. Despite his initial reservations, Neal was convinced by Emory psychologist Maryrose Girardi to give virtual reality therapy a try.

Girardi is one of the researchers on a federally funded study of virtual reality and PTSD. The software, designed by Albert "Skip" Rizzo, uses virtual reality to digitally re-create soldiers' memories.

When "Nightline" visited, she and Neal were re-creating one particular event: an IED hitting Neal's Humvee convoy. The simulation was a full-on sensory assault. Not only was Neal seeing a 3-D version of his convoy rolling through the deserts of Iraq, but he was also hearing loud explosions and planes flying overhead. What's more, the ground was rumbling beneath his feet. Girardi even piped in the smell of diesel fumes.

Gaining Control Over 'Haunting' Visions

The idea behind this therapy is to allow soldiers to fully process the memories that haunt them. Girardi said if you relive a traumatic memory from start to finish enough times, you will gain control over it.

"We learned that even though it feels like the last thing we want to do," said Girardi, "the more that we confront the anxiety that is associated with the trauma, it comes down. We gain control over that memory; we process that memory and that is what lets us move on."

Said Neal, "By going through it there, it's not going through my head at night when I'm trying to sleep or when I'm with my wife."

He said virtual reality has helped him "tremendously."

The Stigma of Mental Health Care

To date, virtual reality therapy has been shown to be effective on a wide range of fears, from flying to elevators to public speaking. And the preliminary results from the federal study in which Neal is taking part hold promise. Neal said he hopes his story will encourage other veterans to seek help. "I think that it still is a huge stigma in the military about getting help for mental health issues -- that you are just less of a soldier if you do go," Neal said.

Video courtesy of the Institute for Creative Technologies and School of Gerontology, University of Southern California